



Bob Kaneko



“You had your sensei at the front of the room and he had different kinds of batons, if you will. You hear about Catholic nuns whacking kids? Well, these guys did the same thing.”

When I visited his Berkeley home last November, I discovered that Mr. Kaneko's younger self had recently received some major press. Earlier in the year, a planned auction to sell a plethora of Japanese American artifacts, artwork and photographs from the camps was met with significant backlash from the community. Facing pressure, the seller canceled the auction but maintained that his family took meticulous care of the items for over 60 years.

And where does Mr. Kaneko come in? Among the auction items was a picture of him as a preschooler, which serendipitously ended up as the lead photograph in a story published by the [New York Times](#).

Mr. Kaneko would end up dedicating his life to education; first as a counselor at Willard, then at Berkeley High School. In their Berkeley home, he and his wife Cathy hosted me in their living room, their dog lying at the foot of the couch. He began to recall memories of camp by talking about his mother, noting that she was alive and well at 98 years old.

I try to verify things with my mother. She's still alive, by the way. I have a picture of her, she's in the mess hall with the staff, standing outside the mess hall.

I have these memories but I never had it verified with anyone else. One of the words I remember was toa-jyuku. I knew it because that was the pro-Japanese school and there was a point, I think, when the government or the army or the Western Defense didn't know what was going on in the camps because there was a section for no-no people, who were actually jailed

there, in Tule Lake. And there were us, that were in families and they had schools. And I remember having a haircut, very short, if not bald or shaved. White shirts, dark pants, dark shoes. Very parochial, and getting up early.

But here we were getting up at the crack of dawn, and we go to the undokai, we're all in order, goose-stepping almost, military-like, and bowing to the east. Instructors yelling at us to bow to the east, Japanese national anthem, I don't know what was going on.

But I was basically a preschooler, right? And you just follow orders. And my parents don't know because they've got their jobs and they're sending you to school. You had your sensei at the front of the room and he had different kinds of batons, if you will. You hear about Catholic nuns whacking kids? Well, these guys did the same thing. I remember I had to go to the bathroom and you have to stand up and raise your hand to get recognized. And I think I peed my pants, at which point, everybody in the classroom got it.

Then I remember doing sumi [calligraphy] you learn how to write Japanese. First part we went to nursery school, American, then the second part was the big Japanese thing. And they got found out and I remember going to my undokai again at the end of how many sessions; they got found out and they were going to deport these teachers. I was thinking the reason why we went to Tule Lake was my dad was a no-no boy. But that wasn't the case at all.

So how did you end up there?

Well, before my dad died, I talked to him a little bit and he said no, we voluntarily evacuated after Pearl Harbor. That he and his brother, and his brother had a family, and he had my mom, and she was pregnant with my sister, and me. And my uncle apparently had a friend living in Auburn, so they were going to go and they thought they'd be safe in what my mother called the "white zone." I guess the Auburn area was designated as a white zone. I don't know if that means, you were safe.

And where were you living before?

In Berkeley. And so, my mom had my sister and we eventually got rounded up there. I knew of a friend, I think his family was living in Oakland. There was a guy who started a [community in Utah](#) and that group never went to camp. I said, "How did your parents go to the store and earn a living?" Well apparently whoever organized it, was kind of like Noah's Ark. The people had different skills he wanted. I thought all the Japanese got corralled and went to camp.

Cathy Kaneko: Now, as far as their trip though, from Berkeley to camp, here's his mom pregnant. They loaded up their car. I guess this other family had a pick-up truck, they put all the mattresses in there and took it up to this farm. It wasn't in the town of Auburn. Those two families stayed in the tool shed because Bob's mom was pregnant, they set up a tent for her close to the house. And Bob and his father and his mother stayed in this tent. She was in her last month's of pregnancy.

That must have been *really* comfortable for her.

Cathy Kaneko: I think she had the baby actually in the house, that's what she told me at one point.

Bob Kaneko: She had an oral history done because she was a domestic and worked for this lady who was an ESL teacher. She wrote this book, she lived in Piedmont. After her husband died, she became more of a companion. She hung out with her, I mean she made her beds and stuff but she wasn't doing floors or windows anymore. But Eleanor Sweat, her husband was very well-connected and she was an ESL teacher in Oakland. In fact I think her husband taught at UC Berkeley.

CK: Well, I think she also worked at CAL. And some project that was doing oral histories.

BK: She got this thing bound and everything. She taped it, too.

Now where did you two meet?

BK: Berkeley schools.

You crossed paths?

CK: Well, he actually talked me into taking the job there.

BK: I did not.

CK: You did too. *[laughs]*

BK: I was pretty objective.

So what happened in the camps?

BK: Well they voluntarily went to Auburn. And they got rounded up. Actually my mother said that the area they were in was called Ophir. In fact my sister's birth certificate says "Rural California."

CK: His mom said the doctor didn't make the birth, so their friend's wife delivered the baby and the doctor got there shortly afterward.

What were your parents doing before, when the war broke out?

BK: They were working at the North Bay Cleaners on Vine Street. He was working there before they got married, I gathered from reading my mother's oral history. And then, I think she worked there and did mending and sewing buttons.

And then after the war, where did they work?

Well after the war, things weren't set up back here. I think the intention was to come back to Berkeley. My mother's oldest brother was here, he was settled, Frank Matsui. They were getting things set up. So once we got out, we stayed in Mt. Shasta for about a year. My dad worked on the railroad because things were steamy still about Japanese; feelings about Japanese. We stayed at a section house. I guess there were other families who were all Japanese. Literally, here was the section house and the train tracks were right there. So when the trains went through, we were asleep on bunk beds. My dad and I were on the bottom, my mom and my sisters were on the top, I think. You could feel at night time, like the place was tipping over. Strange.

It was strange. So we stayed in Mt. Shasta and he worked for Southern Pacific or somebody. The section house was where the migrant workers generally stayed and they kept tools there. But they managed to clean it up, made it work for them.

What did he ultimately end up doing?

He was a gardener. All the men, all my uncles.

Did you ever know of anything he wanted to go into?

No, it was just a job.

Do you remember anything about how they felt in the camps? Or anything that your mom would say? Or did they just have that attitude of —

Shikata ga nai? Yeah, sort of that. “It was happening,” that was just their attitude. “That’s just the way it is” kind of thing. I was a probation officer for part of my career but my dad was proud that I was a probation officer, or so my mother said. My dad never expressed his feelings but he said he was a probation officer in camp. His education was limited. He went to junior high and that’s it. Never finished high school. But he seemed to be proud of that [of being a probation officer]. He wasn’t particularly pro-Japanese but I don’t know if he was particularly bitter about going to camp. I never got that feeling.



A young Bob Kaneko's photo made it in this New York Times article on the disputed [Eaton collection](#)

And your mother was the same?

Yep, she had babies. My youngest sister was born in camp. Right before the end, May of '45.

And you personally, though you were young, did you ever reflect on what happened?

Well I did, once I started learning a little bit, and never spoke to my parents about it. But when I started hearing about "no-no," my imagination was because we went to Tule Lake, my dad was a "no-no." Didn't even think about my sisters being born and all that and the pressures that he had towards family, or to keep the family together. No, not really.

Cathy, were you born before or after the war?

CK: I was born after the war. I was raised in Wyoming so I never even heard about internment until actually I moved out here and was getting my credential at CAL. And that's when I first heard about it. And there was a camp in Wyoming, too. Heart Mountain. Now one thing, with just little stories about their [the Kaneko] family, his mom who has always done domestic things — one of the things she took with her when they went up to Auburn and on to camp was her sewing machine. And she said that really saved her.

BK: That was her life.

CK: She took one cardboard suitcase, for her and Bob. She basically didn't have any clothes for the new baby. But when they got up there, she made new clothes for them. She even brought that same sewing machine back to Berkeley.

That was her lifeline.

BK: Yep, that's what she said, that was her life. Those were her own words.

And then your dad was some kind of officer, or keeper of the peace?

BK: Right. As I recall, he sure had a lot of liberties. I don't recall at what point but I remember he had access to a military vehicle to drive into town. So I don't know what the deal was with that and I don't know at what point either. Things might have cooled in as far as relationships with the community.

CK: [*To BK*] What about some of your memories as a kid, in camp?

BK: I can recall that things must have been chaotic. Some of the things I remember, there must've been gangs of kids doing stuff that wasn't kosher. Because they had us little kids stealing. I remember having to steal cigarettes, I don't know if they threatened me or what, and taking cigarettes to these guys. They weren't friends or anything but I just did that stuff.

You remember them being older than you?

Yeah they were older. They weren't men. They were kids still. And there used to be a boiler room. I didn't understand what that was heating, don't know if that was heating the mess hall or what. I remember my cousin and I sitting in there looking through Montgomery Wards and Sears catalogs, sitting there and saying "I want that, I want that." Wish book stuff. Stealing potatoes from the mess hall and baking them basically in the boiler. And then I can remember also being accused, my cousin and I, of burning down the boiler room. The boiler room burned.

Somebody blamed you for it?

BK: Inferred, if not, blamed us. I felt guilty.

CK: Was that the big fire at Tule Lake?

BK: I don't know what the big fire was about. There was a big fire at Tule Lake too where one of the guys got killed fighting it. That was sad, I don't know who it was. Somebody my parents knew. Young guy.

[Other memories were] having oyatsu 3:00 in the afternoon. Get oatmeal cookie, glass of milk, and an orange, or something like that. That was snack time. I remember that. I always liked my food. The hard part was going to the bathroom, going to the latrine. You had to leave your one room house, just one room, with a potbelly stove. Having to go to the bathroom, walk through the snow to get to the bathroom and stuff like that. I don't think we were that far but if you're used to having a bathroom in your own house and stuff, it's sort of a drag. But you know, you just did it.

What else did I remember? Just normal stuff. They'd have me doing sumo and I guess I was sort of a disappointment because I was big for my age. I remember my parents commenting, my dad particularly: "He's big but that's about all." Or something like that. That was a common theme I heard from him as I was growing up.

Meaning?

Meaning he wasn't particularly proud, I wasn't outstanding at sports. I

remember doing kendo, sumo, and remember I had to recite a poem. Had to memorize this poem, remember being nervous. But I still remember the poem. I think it was "One Bunch of Grapes." My mother cracks up when I tell her that. "You still remember that!" Because I remember my mother was really proud of me. My dad, I don't know.

CK: And you still like grapes.

BK: I still love grapes. Still good for you. But yeah, my memories are pretty childlike. I remember extremely hot weather, extremely cold weather, winters. Kept warm during the cold, I don't feel like I suffered any. I had my tonsils pulled, I think in camp. But the treat was that you get ice cream. Ice cream was good.

Sadly, Mr. Kaneko passed away on September 16, 2016 prior to this interview getting publishing. I regret he wasn't able to read it, but hope this can pay a small honor to his accomplished life and memory.

ORIGINALLY POSTED ON SEPTEMBER 29, 2016